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‘Sermons in Stones’: Augustine, Joseph Hall, and As You Like It

Duke Senior claims the exiles’ ‘life, exempt from public haunt, / Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones’ (2.1.17-9). The Arden editor notes the three parallel metaphors on ‘homiletic edification in inanimate things’, and cross-refers to the passage in 3.2.152-4 where Rosalind remarks tartly on the boredom of listening to long sermons. The New Cambridge editor brings forward Richard Hooker on the threefold sources of Christian revelation: the bible, sermons, and the book of nature. The Oxford editor speaks of graceful platitudes, tinged with Stoicism.¹

Many Renaissance trees speak out (whether they are enchanted beings, such as Spenser’s Fradubio, or merely convenient noticeboards, as Orlando makes them), and puns on leaves and branches are common. But it is unusual, in Renaissance literature, for brooks and stones to babble on instructively (and the last two phrases in the three images do not appear in a proximity search in EEBO-TCP). Paul Willis argues that the idea may arise from Christ’s warning that if his disciples may not praise him the very stones of Jerusalem would do so (Luke 19.40).² But this misses the stress on good governance in the Duke’s words.

¹ W. Shakespeare, As You Like It, ed. J. Dusi, Arden Third Series (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 2.1.17-19n; ed. M. Hattaway, New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2.1.16-17n; ed. A. Brissenden (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1993), 2.1.12-17n.

² P.J. Willis, ‘Tongues in Trees’: the Book of Nature in As You like It, Modern Language Studies 18. 3 (1988), pp. 65-74.

Joseph Hall's Arte of Divine Meditation (1606) demonstrates how 'Extemporal Meditation' wells up from the 'infinite multitude of objects' which the external world presents. The 'holy and sweete Augustine, from occasion of the water-course neere to his Lodging, running among the pebbles, sometimes more silently, sometimes in a baser murmure, and sometimes in a shriller note, entred into the thought and discourse of that excellent order which God hath settled in these inferior things'.³ Though Hall does not give the precise reference, the story comes from the start of Augustine's De ordine (Of Order) 1.3.6, where water, running first loud then soft as it passes over impediments, inspires a discussion about causation, which moves into whether all things are under divine governance, from ripples of water to states. There is no contemporary printed English version of the work, but Erasmus completed a ten-volume edition of Augustine's works in 1529, the first of which included De ordine.⁴

The analogue is significant: where Orlando writes on nature, the Duke learns from it, an opposition of youthful solipsism and outward-facing experience. The Duke's speech explores the idea that good governance depends on 'keeping it real', attending to the lessons of the world about him.

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³ J. Hall, The Arte of Divine Meditation (1606), pp. 10-11, 13-4.

⁴ Augustine, De ordine, in D. Aurelii Augustini ... omnium operum primus (-decimus) tomus, summa vigilantia repurgatorum, ed. D. Erasmus (1528-9), vol. 1, p. 322.